THE LAST WINNEBAGO IN NORTHEAST IOWA

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Introduction

The Yellow River Forest in northeastern Iowa is old. The whole area is old. There is the Mississippi River, the old glaciated rocks that form well-weathered hills, and old native forests teeming with wildlife. Human habitation of this strip of land along the Mississippi River dates back to the Paleo-Indians. Through the years this area has yielded abundant game for hunting and fishing. My father, Paul Denys Coté, of French Canadian descent, grew up in this environment fishing, hunting, and exploring. Unexpected things happen that for some reason or another affect us and stay in our memories. My father has remembered one such incident.

Before school started in August 1941, I went camping for three nights with two friends of mine, John Leschensky and Jim Ludeman. I was 15 and the other two boys were 13. John's father drove us to their cabin along the Mississippi River about a half mile upriver from Waukon Junction, Iowa [Fig. 1]. My folks were to come and get us in four days. The cabin was along a back slough of the main channel on the west side of the river.

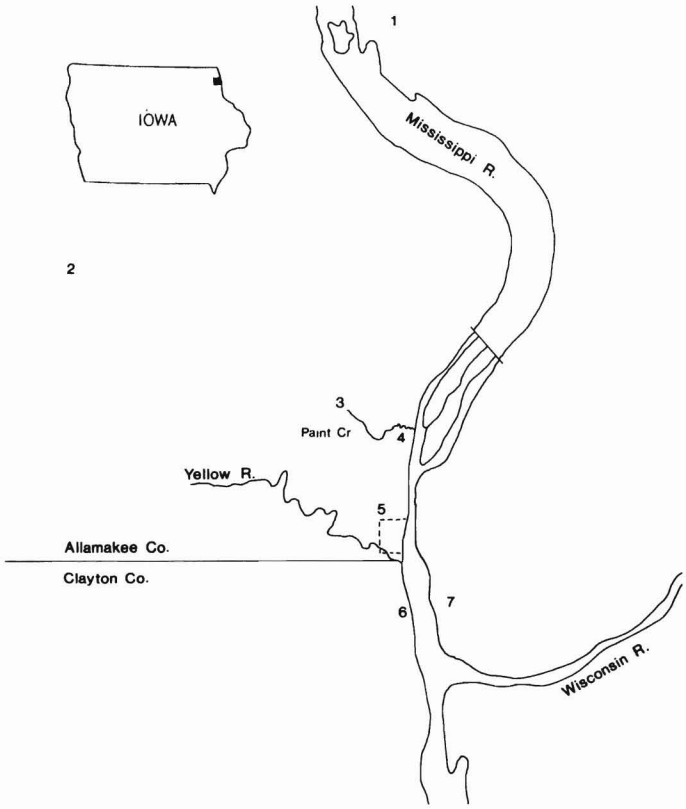

Figure 1. Map of vicinity around Waukon Junction, Allamakee County, Iowa: (1) DeSoto, Wisconsin; (2) Waukon, Iowa; (3) Yellow River State Forest; (4) Waukon Junction, Iowa; (5) Effigy Mounds National Monument; (6) Marquette, Iowa; (7) Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin.

The junction at Waukon Junction was named after the railroad switch in the tracks that ran north and south following the river, and the name Waukon comes from a Winnebago Indian. Not many other cabins were around at that time. There was only a dirt road where the Great River Road is now.

We did some fishing and set a trot line for the night. It was a typical cool late summer night and very quiet, with no cars or wind. Reverberating through the valley, we heard the rolling sound of a train a few miles away on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi. Somewhere not far away, someone was chanting, in a sing-song manner—a sound we had not heard during the day. We could hear no screaming or loud noises, just an odd soft chanting. I suggested we go check it out, but the other two boys were apprehensive and refused, so I went alone. I walked west, away from the river and cabin, moving along cautiously on an old dirt road that led across the railroad tracks, and partway up a hill. When I came nearer to the chanting, I crawled through tall grasses to avoid being seen, moving slowly and quietly until I could see the front of a tent and some Indians no more than 30 feet away. The Indians did not hear my approach and I lay prone in the thick grasses somewhat uphill from their campsite, the noises of nighttime insects helping to hide any rustling I might make. They could not see me but I could see them quite well and it was like looking into the past.

An elderly Indian couple chanting softly in unison, were seated on cleared ground near their white rectangular canvas tent. Their clothes were plain and they wore buckskin moccasins. The front flaps of the tent were rolled back, and inside was a young woman I assumed to be their daughter. She was lying on blankets spread over reed mattings. The back of the tent was shut. Outside, a candle flickered in an old glass jar and a small campfire crackled. I had been to their home site before with my parents so I knew who they were: the Big Bear–Holt family. Emma Big Bear wove baskets of black ash strips [Fig. 2], and made moccasins and other articles of buckskin [Fig. 3], often well decorated with artistic beadwork, while Henry Holt brought in game. When Mom had bought baskets from Emma earlier that same summer, Emma had told her that their daughter, Emmaline, had TB (tuberculosis), a wasting disease.

Figure 2. Thin black ash strips were used by Emma Big Bear to make these two small baskets. Half size. (Private collection. Photo by Ron Testa.)

Figure 3. In 1941, the author's paternal grandmother commissioned Emma Big Bear to make this beaded leather elephant as an effigy of the Republican Party. It was hoped that Emma would put special spiritual powers into the elephant so that the Democrat president, F.D. Roosevelt, who was favoring U.S. military involvement in European affairs, would be replaced by a Republican. Three quarters size. (Private collection. Photo by Ron Testa.)

The short, large Indian outside the tent was using a knobbed stick to tap in time to their chanting, on a small drum made from a section of black inner tube rubber stretched over the mouth of a two quart Mason jar. She handed the stick and makeshift drum to her husband, who continued tapping, even when their liturgical chanting ceased as the mother got up and went into the tent to tend their daughter. The chant could have been a song or a story, but I couldn't understand the Indian words. It seemed to be a chant of sympathy for their sick daughter, as if they had been appealing to the spirits.

It was very dark and I was scared, fearing the Indians would be angry if they discovered me, and remembering only too clearly how often I had watched cowboys and Indians battle it out in dark movie houses. The Indians were always portrayed as being keenly perceptive of their surroundings.

I knew the longer I stayed, the greater the risk of my being perceived. Nevertheless, I lay still in the grass enthralled for nearly half an hour. Finally, with dew beginning to form on the grasses, mosquitoes biting and a growing concern in my mind that there might be rattlesnakes nearby, I decided not to stay any longer. I did not want to be seen and was becoming embarrassed by my own intrusion on their privacy, so I carefully crawled back through the weeds and walked toward the cabin where my friends were.

As I walked, I was filled with sympathy for the Indians I had seen. After my return to the cabin and finding my friends asleep, I lay in bed for a long while thinking about Indians and their vanishing way of life. I figured I had been witnessing a final page in history.

Soon after daybreak, we three boys checked our trot line and pulled in two big carp and a large gar that were hooked during the night. We were out to catch catfish, not carp or gar. Gar and carp are tasty but bony. I wondered if the Big Bears would like the carp. Even though, while checking on the trot line, I had told my friends about the events of last night, they still would not go to the Indian camp with me, so I took the carp and headed toward their tent in the early morning sunlight.

Henry was standing outside the tent watching as I slowly and noisily approached. I walked up to him and held out the fish as a gift. Emma emerged from the tent and exchanged some words with Henry in their own tongue. I didn't see Emmaline because the tent door flap was now only partly open and it would have been impolite for me to try to look inside. Emma then addressed me in broken English, saying that they were very happy to get these fresh fish. I guess Henry didn't speak English much, but after I laid the fish on the ground, he smiled.

I told them about the gar that was also caught on the trot line and how we boys had killed it and left it on the muddy river bank. Emma said "You got." I understood what she meant so I went back to the river, got the gar, and brought it back to them. Emma thanked me and told me that I was a "good Indian," which I considered a great compliment.

This camping trip in August 1941 was the last time I saw Emmaline.

Winnebago Indians in Northeast Iowa

The Winnebago originally lived on the western shores of Lake Michigan, especially on Door County peninsula. They moved westward toward the Mississippi River in the seventeenth century due to the population influx of eastern Indians and Europeans and due in some measure to the continuing warfare with the Chippewa, Ottawa, and, to a lesser extent, the Menominee, with whom they later formed a loose alliance. In 1639 or 1640, thousands of Winnebago were reported living in the area of Green Bay and Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin, by the explorer Jean Nicolet. Thirty years later, Nicolas Perrot encountered a population of only 600, their numbers having been greatly reduced by warfare with the Illinois (Lurie 1960). The Winnebago endured in Wisconsin and for a while in Iowa. Moved further west by early nineteenth-century treaties, some Winnebago lived in northeast Iowa.

The Neutral Line established between the Sioux on the north and the Sac and Fox on the south at a council meeting in Prairie du Chien on August 19, 1825, started at the mouth of the Upper Iowa River, followed the river across Winneshiek County to its source, and extended to Hawarden on the Big Sioux River in western Iowa. The council meeting at Prairie du Chien on July 15, 1830, established a Neutral Ground 20 miles wide on each side of the Neutral Line that was to be a strip of land that the Sioux and Sac and Fox could hunt and fish on unmolested. In treaties signed September 15, 1832, and November 1, 1837, at Washington, D.C., the Winnebago were given that portion of the Neutral Ground from the Mississippi and west for 40 miles, in exchange for Winnebago lands on the east side of the Mississippi and certain interests on the west side (Hexom 1913). However, only small bands of Winnebago moved in because the Sioux and Sac and Fox were still hostile. In 1840, 250 Winnebago were forced to move to the Turkey River area of the Neutral Ground from Portage, Wisconsin, by the U.S. Infantry. Fort Atkinson in Iowa was built and protected by troops from 1840 to 1849. Despite the fact that the Iowa Winnebago were moved to a new reservation near Ft. Snelling at Long Prairie, Minnesota, in 1848, small bands continually returned to Wisconsin. Orr (1971) reports seeing a band of Winnebago near the end of the Civil War passing the Minert School near McGregor, Iowa. Walking along the Old Military Trail which followed the divide between the

Turkey and Yellow rivers, "they were strung out along the road for a quarter of a mile and had a few ponies, but most of them were on foot—the squaws carrying big bundles, or some of them both a papoose and a bundle. At the head, alone, marched an Indian clothed in a breechcloth and moccasins to which he had added of the white man's clothes, a plug hat and a white shirt" (Orr 1971:600).

Chief Waukon Decorah of the Mississippi River Winnebago bands, who signed the original treaty of 1825 (Hexom 1913), had several children. One of his probable descendants was Chief Big Bear (in Winnebago, *Hoonch-hut-to-ne-kah*).

Emma Big Bear—The Last Winnebago in Northeast Iowa

Emma Big Bear was born at Tomah, Monroe County, Wisconsin, on July 5, 1869, to Chief Big Bear and Mary Blue Wing in a small frame house on the Winnebago Indian Reservation.

Emma's first husband was Little Beaver, also a Winnebago. Nothing else is known about Little Beaver or the first half of Emma's life. It is believed that Emma spent most of these years in Wisconsin; however, Emma may have lived near Fort Atkinson, Iowa, for a while. Fort Atkinson was built on the Turkey River in Winneshiek County for the protection of the Winnebago Indians. It sits in the middle of one of the most archaeologically significant areas of mounds in the state, including the Turkey River Mound Group State Preserve.

Emma's second husband was William J. (Henry) Holt who was born August 5, 1866, at Winnebago, Nebraska, of Winnebago and Sioux parents. Henry's Winnebago name was *Wa-gay-cha-who-ga* which means "come from the sky." Emma and Henry were married on May 8, 1917, in Thurston, Nebraska, and then moved to Waukon Junction, Iowa, where their daughter, Emmaline, was born on February 1, 1918 (Fig. 4). Emma was 47 years old when Emmaline was born.

Emmaline married Fred Keith Big Soldier who was her age and part Winnebago. They had a daughter, Eirgiline Decorah. While Fred was stationed overseas serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Emmaline and Eirgiline lived with Henry and Emma at Waukon Junction.

Emma and Henry occupied a wickiup in the first valley north of Waukon Junction for 25 years until Henry's death in 1944. Small trees were bent over to form the frame of the round-roofed, circular wickiup, which was then covered with elm bark and sheet tin (Fig. 5). The wickiup served as winter quarters, and during the summer they lived in a tent at the same site. In the first half of this century, squatters were common on state and federal lands on the Iowa banks of the Mississippi, but while their quarters were summer cabins, Emma and Henry were the only year-round inhabitants.

Extracting a living from naturally occurring resources, they hunted and gathered rather than pursued the modern mode of agriculture. Such an adaptation required an intimate familiarity with the cycles of plants and animals (Mallam 1984). Flora and fauna abounded in the surrounding rivers and forests. Henry had a kayak paddle and a small dugout canoe that barely carried his weight, as he was rather

Figure 4. Emma Big Bear and Emmaline Big Bear–Holt, ca. 1918. (Glass lantern slide in unknown private collection. Photo courtesy of Pat Matt.)

heavy set (L.J. Lindemann, personal communication 1972). Henry would mostly hunt, trap and fish for their living, although he also helped Emma and Emmaline make baskets.

In the Mississippi sloughs, especially Mud Hen Bottoms, Emma found her favorite food—the underwater roots of the Indian lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*). A common food for many Indian tribes, its banana-shaped tubers can be dried and stored, and have a flavor similar to sweet potatoes (Runkel and Bull 1979). Wild ginseng roots were also gathered and sold to white people. Occasionally, Emma would ride the freight trains for a while, then jump off and search the forests for ginseng, berries, nuts, and medicinal herbs and roots. Sometimes Emma would stay in the woods for a week or more digging ginseng which she would dry and then sell. She would take a blanket with her and sleep on the ground.

Henry died of pneumonia on January 2, 1944, at the age of 77. He had gone to get water out of an ice hole on a creek near his home. The ice hole had frozen over, so he stamped the thin ice with his foot, slipped, and fell through,breaking several ribs. Henry was buried at his place of birth, Winnebago, Nebraska.

Emmaline was only 27 years old when she died on July 16, 1945, almost four years after my father last saw her. She also was buried at Winnebago, Nebraska. The death certificate states that Emmaline, seen by a physician in DeSoto, Wisconsin, had been dead for several hours when he was called, and that he did not know the cause of death. Emma, after the death of her husband and then her daughter, was the only full-blooded Winnebago left living in Clayton County,

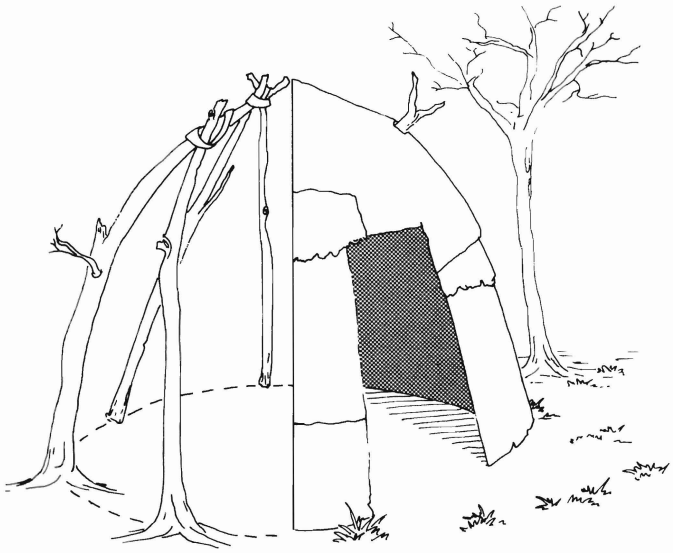

Figure 5. Big Bear–Holt wickiup along Paint Creek in first valley north of Waukon Junction. Small trees were bent over to form a round roofed wickiup covered with elm bark and sheet tin. Cutaway view. (Artist's conception by Demetrios Betinis, Field Museum of Natural History.)

probably in all of northeast Iowa. After Emmaline's death, it is possible that Emmaline's husband and daughter went to live in Oklahoma, as Emma would go there during the following winters to visit relatives.

From then on Emma lived alone, at first in a modern Quonset-style wickiup that her friends helped build on the Mississippi River front in McGregor. Spring floods would force Emma to live temporarily in a tent. One time in the 1950s, just the top of her wickiup was out of the water. After that she moved into a building next to the Old Dicky building on the main street in Marquette. Although raised in a frame house, Emma chose to live close to nature in wickiups and tents until her later years. People trapping and fishing would give her their spare catches of muskrat, raccoon, opossum, turtle, and fish. She would skin the muskrats and raccoon for the trappers in exchange for the meat. To earn a living, Emma continued wefting and herb hunting, sometimes selling her wares by the Marquette bridge over the Mississippi. She always wore beaded moccasins, a shawl for a coat, and when it was cold, two skirts and layers of other clothing. When she could get a ride, Emma would go visit nearby Indians that lived upriver near DeSoto, Wisconsin. She, in turn, was hospitable and had many Indian visitors, several of whom she referred to as "cousins."

Chief Red Bird, a "cousin" of Emma's, stayed at her wickiup for a while, and he helped her by preparing black ash logs for basketry materials. Only black ash was used in making baskets. The whole procedure required cutting a limb 8 to 10 feet long that was very straight with no knots. After peeling off the bark, the limb was pounded with the blunt end of a single bit axe or maul until the growth rings separated. With a knife and then scissors, the wood was split to make ductile ribbons. At first Emma made her own natural dyes for the baskets, but later she used commercial wood dyes from the paper mills. Basket making as an industry was adopted by the Winnebago from the Ojibwa and Menominee at the turn of the century (Radin 1920).

Emma knew about the tradition of her ancestors inhabiting this area near the Effigy Mounds sacred space. She and her family lived at this prehistoric site, preferring to maintain the Indian tradition of not wandering far from the graves of the ancestors. Perhaps the bear effigy mounds drew Emma's attention since her last name was Big Bear. Because Emma claimed to be a direct descendant of Waukon Decorah, chief of the Winnebago, she refused to live on a reservation, wanting to live along the Mississippi River as her ancestors did.

The McGregor *North Iowa Times* of January 12, 1950, recounted that Emma was involved in a federal Indian land suit trial in Madison, Wisconsin, which resulted in her recovery of an 80 acre farm in Grant County, Wisconsin. The tract is located on the Wisconsin hillside across the Mississippi from Lansing, Iowa. Unfortunately, there were no buildings, and most of the timber had been removed. "Emma is appreciative and friendly in a grumpy sort of way, which McGregorites understand," the *Times* reported. Emma continued to live in Marquette (Fig. 6) until she became ill, and after a stay in the hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, was transferred

Figure 6. Emma Big Bear, ca. 1960. (Photo by Goergen Studio, Racine, Wisconsin.)

to the Northgate Nursing Home in Waukon, where she died on August 21, 1968, at the age of 99. The death certificate records the cause of death as dehydration and arteriosclerotic gangrene of the right leg. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the Blue Wing cemetery near the town of LaGrange, Wisconsin. The Blue Wing cemetery, reserved for Winnebago Indians, has several unmarked graves (Carolyn Habelman, Wisconsin State Old Cemetery Society, personal communication 1987) and is the resting place for Red Bird, Emma's "cousin"; Chief Blue Wing, Emma's grandfather(?); and Big Bear, Emma's first husband(?).

Acknowledgments

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